Community Violence Exposure: Protective and Risk Factors in Hmong Young Adults

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ABSTRACT
Individuals who are exposed to violence in their communities are at greater risk for internalizing and externalizing the effects of violence. There are protective and risk factors that can positively or negatively affect individuals’ psychological and behavioral outcomes. This study investigated community violence exposure and violent behaviors in 100 Hmong young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 in Northern California. Specifically, this study investigated the relationship among community violence exposure, ethnic identity, violence and at-risk behaviors in Hmong young adults. As expected, the results showed that Hmong young adults reporting higher exposure of community violence through victimization also reported higher internalizing symptoms and externalizing behaviors. As expected, the results showed that Hmong young adults reporting higher levels of witnessing community violence reported more school misconduct. As expected, the results showed that Hmong young adults reporting higher ethnic identity reported lower externalizing symptoms and school misconduct.

In the past decade, there has been a rise in violence in local communities in the United States. According to the Statistical Abstract of the United States (2010), the total number of violent crime offenses (e.g., murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) was 1,345,000 in 1980 and 1,408,000 in 2007. Although violence can affect all people, research has demonstrated that adolescents are at a higher risk for exposure to community violence during their lifespan (Voisin 2007). Researchers have noted the rise in youth violence, especially in urban areas. However, even young adults in low-risk areas such as rural communities have seen high rates of violence exposure (Scarpa 2003). Violence rates for ethnic minorities have also increased, with studies showing that ethnic minority youth are disproportionately affected by community violence (Cooley-Quille et al. 2001). Exposure to community violence continues to be a public health concern and threatens youth development for all racial, ethnic, and social groups (Lambert et al. 2005). However, there is a dearth of research on Asian Americans and violence, especially on Hmong Americans. The purpose of this study
is to investigate violence exposure and at-risk behaviors in the Hmong population. Specifically, this study focuses on the relationship between the amount of community violence exposure, exposure through victimization and witnessing, and ethnic identity in Hmong young adults. The following literature review examines youth violence, with a focus on internalizing and externalizing behaviors, as well as the role of protective factors such as ethnic identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community violence affects all people, including those who may witness violence through exposure or victimization. Although there is a large amount of research on the effects of violence on African Americans and Latinos, there is limited research on Asian Americans. Part of the issue involves positive images of Asian Americans achieving the American dream, which may mask at-risk and violence rates. For example, Asian Americans are often viewed as the “model minority,” a group of people who adapt to and are highly successful in U.S. society. Chao, Chiu and Lee (2010) describe the term “model minority” as “a hardworking, successful, and law-abiding ethnic minority that overcomes hardship, oppression, and discrimination to achieve great success” (44). Yet, these researchers go on to state that Asian American youth are more likely to be arrested for criminal offenses than other racial groups. Interestingly, Tsunokai (2005) found that Asian American college students who were involved in gangs showed problem behaviors in school. Ho (2008) suggested there is a need to investigate Asian American adolescents and how the witnessing of or victimization in community violence is associated with internalizing behaviors.

Community Violence Exposure and Consequences

Research on violence has demonstrated relationships between community violence exposure and a number of outcome variables for those living in these communities. Research has shown an association between personal victimization and internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Ho 2008). One study found that community violence exposure was associated with negative outcomes for children; specifically, exposure to community violence put children and adolescents at risk for distress-related symptoms, behavioral problems, and poor school functioning (Farver et al. 2005). Gorman-Smith, Henry, and Tolan (2004) suggest that the risk for aggression, delinquent behaviors, and violence later in life can be explained by violence exposure. Haden and Scarpa (2008) state that:
“...understanding outcomes for young adults is essential given that these individuals are experiencing a period of increased responsibility, transitioning between adolescence and middle adulthood when decisions regarding career, partnering, and children are often made” (1214).

The negative outcomes can be physiological in nature as well. With exposure to violence and the risk of negative outcomes, the consequences of violence have become a growing concern for researchers investigating community welfare.

**Community Violence Exposure and Internalizing Symptoms**

In children and adolescents, exposure to violence in the community is a risk factor for depression (Sieger et al. 2004). Rosenthal (2000) investigated recurring real-life exposure to violence that included direct victimization and witnessing violence against others and their relationship with psychological trauma symptoms. Findings suggested that exposure to recurring community violence (whether witnessing the violence or being directly victimized) was associated with psychological trauma symptoms (e.g., anger, anxiety, depression, and dissociation) in late adolescence (Rosenthal 2000). Specifically, this study suggested that there is a possibility that the type of exposure to community violence produces different types of psychological trauma symptoms (Rosenthal 2000). Other scholars have discovered a relationship between exposure to violence and internalizing behaviors (e.g., depression and anxiety) (Fitzpatrick et al. 2005; Hammack et al. 2004). Community violence exposure also has a negative impact on adolescent physical and mental health (Berenson et al. 2001).

**Community Violence Exposure and Externalizing Behaviors**

Research shows that adolescents’ risk of engaging in delinquent behaviors and substance use increase with repeated violence exposure from peers and relatives in their community (Zinzow et al. 2009). According to Raghavan et al. (2006; 2009), when individuals live in neighborhoods with high exposures to violence, there is a direct increase in the community members’ use of violence. Wilkinson and Carr (2008) found a link between the stress of community violence exposure through victimization and people’s violent behaviors in the future. The impact of community violence exposure is not confined to that respective community; research shows that youth exposed to violence were more likely to report poor educational outcomes (Voisin 2007).

**Protective Factors in Relation to Violence**

A body of literature on violence has demonstrated a number of risk and protective factors that may be related to increasing or buffering at-risk and
violent behaviors. Researchers have identified a number of protective factors that reduce the impact of exposure to violence and risk factors that can increase the impact of community violence. For example, studies have shown that the type of parental support one has can serve as either a protective or risk factor in relation to violence exposure. Of concern in the present study is the relationship between of ethnic identity and violence.

Social Identity Theory and Ethnic Identity
Tajfel defines “social identity” as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from [his] knowledge of [his] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significant attached to that membership” (Phinney and Ong 2007). Adolescents may strive to maintain a positive social identity in order to maintain higher self-esteem (Phinney et al. 2001). Among many ethnic minority group members, ethnic identity is considered to be an important social identity (Phinney and Ong, 2007). “Ethnic identity” is broadly defined as “a sense of self as a group member that develops over time through an active process of investigation, learning and commitment” (Phinney et al. 2001). The concept of “ethnicity” generally consists of self-identification, belongingness, commitment, sense of shared values, and attitudes towards one’s ethnic group (2001). Research shows that adolescents from lower status ethnic groups may have a desire to seek knowledge about their ethnicity, which can then lead to positive outcomes. For example, psychological well-being and better school adjustment has been associated with a strong and secure ethnic identity (2001). In addition, anger, depression, and violence may result when minority group members and immigrants feel that they have to conform to the larger group (2001). Ethnic identity provides a sense of belonging to and an awareness of a person’s ethnic group and serves as a protective factor for a number of psychological variables, including discrimination (Lee 2003). This study examines the role of ethnic identity in relation to at-risk and violent behaviors.

PURPOSE
The purpose of this study is to investigate violence exposure and at-risk behaviors in Hmong young adults. Specifically, it is expected that the amount of community violence to which Hmong young adults are exposed (through victimization or witnessing) will predict their at-risk and violent behaviors. It is also expected that this study will show that having an ethnic identity serves to protect participants from violence and at-risk behaviors.
METHOD

Participants included 100 Hmong young adults from Northern California. The sample consisted of 36 female participants and 64 male participants. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 30, with a mean age of 22.9 (SD = 3.21). Participants’ education level ranged from high school, some college, bachelor’s degree, graduate school, and master’s degree. The yearly household income included 28.1% reporting less than $14,999 per year; 25% indicating $15,000 to $24,000; 20.8% reporting $25,000 to $34,999; 7.3% reporting $35,000 to $44,999; 8.3% reporting $45,000 to $54,999, and 3.0% reporting $55,000 or more. For “generational status,” which looks at the family’s history and birth place, 31.6% reported first generation, 65.3% reported second generation, and 3.2% reported third generation or higher. For participants born outside of the U.S., 6% of participants were born in Laos and 18% of participants were born in Thailand. The length of time living in the U.S. for those participants who were born in another country ranged from 10-30 years.

The participants were selected based on the following eligibility criteria:

1. Self-identified as Hmong
2. Were at least 18 years of age and younger than 40 years of age
3. Could speak and read English

Participants were recruited via flyers posted on the campus of California State University, Sacramento and in local Hmong stores; a separate recruitment flyer was sent via e-mail to the researcher’s contacts in the community. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate in this study without compensation.

Procedures

At the beginning of the study, the researcher explained the general procedures of the study to the participants. Participants were told that participation in the study would be entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants were instructed that their responses would be confidential and anonymous, and that the researcher would not be looking at individual responses but rather only at the overall trends among Hmong young adults. Participants read and signed a written consent form if they agreed to participate in the study. After participants signed the consent form, they returned the forms to the researcher, who placed the consent form in a separate envelope to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.
Once the consent forms were collected, the researcher distributed the packet of inventories (see “Measures’). After the participants completed the inventories, the researcher collected the packets, placed them in a separate envelope from the consent forms, and debriefed the participants. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and discussed any questions/concerns participants might have had about the study.

**Measures**

Participants completed the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised (MEIM-R), an assessment that focuses on ethnic identity, especially one’s sense of attachment, belonging, and understanding related one’s own ethnicity (Phinney and Ong 2007). MEIM-R measures “the strength and security” of one’s ethnic identity using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*).

Participants also completed the Community Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), a self-reported assessment of exposure to community violence (Schwartz and Proctor 2000). The CEQ consists of two subscales that are administered separately. The first subscale consists of 11 items that assess community violence with direct exposure by victimization. The second subscale consists of 14 items that assess community violence exposure through witnessing. Participants were instructed to exclude incidents from family or other members in the home and to report only real-life events from their communities and neighborhoods. They ranked the frequency of each item on a four-point Likert rating scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few*, 4 = *lots of times*).

Participants completed the Youth Self-Report Inventory (Achenbach 1991), a self-reported assessment that ask if participants have experienced any of the problems indicated now or within the past six months. The full Youth Self-Report Inventory has a total of 112 items using a three-point response scale (0 = *not true or not at all*, 1 = *sometimes or somewhat true*, and 2 = *very true or often*). In the current study, only part of the Youth Self-Report Inventory was utilized; the participants used a survey containing 15 items to better evaluate internalizing behaviors. The items inquired about a range of issues, from feelings of sadness and worthlessness to thoughts about self-harm.

Participants completed the Delinquent-Type Behavior Scale (Jessor et al. 1989), an 11-item inventory that examines externalizing behaviors, aggressive behaviors and school misconduct. For school misconduct, participants responded to five items regarding attendance. Another variable for behaviors related to school performance is trouble avoidance; participants responded to four items regarding how often the indicated incidents occurred. This scale uses a five-point rating scale (0 = *never*, 1 = *once*, 2 = *twice*, 3 = *three or four times*,...
and 5 = *five or more times*) adapted from the National Education Longitudinal Study. When scoring the items, lower scores indicate better school behavior and higher scores indicate poorer school behavior.

Participants also filled out a demographics sheet that asked them about their ethnicity, social class, generational status, and gender.

RESULTS

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed to test the main hypotheses in this study. All tests were analyzed at an alpha level set at $p < .05$. Standard regression analyses were conducted to test the main hypotheses in this study.

Descriptive Analysis

Overall, participants reported a mean ethnic identity score of 3.94 (Table 1). Participants reported low community violence exposure through victimization, with 77.3% indicating “never,” 20.7% indicating “once,” and 2% indicating “a few times.” Participants reported moderate community violence exposure through witnessing, with 18.7% indicating “never,” 27.4% indicating “once,” 33.3% indicating “a few times,” and 10.3% indicating “lots of times.” For internalizing symptoms, 79% of participants reported “not at all” and 21% of participants reported “sometimes.” For aggression, 69.5% of participants reported “never,” 23% of participants reported “once,” 6% of participants reported “twice,” and 1% of participants reported “three or four times.” For school misconduct, 42.8% of participants reported “never,” 28.5% of participants reported “once,” 13.2% of participants reported “twice,” 8.1% of participants reported “three or more times,” and 4% of participants reported “five or more times.” All mean scores are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witness to Violence</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of Violence</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing Behaviors</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Externalizing Behaviors</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Misconduct</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regression Analysis for Internalizing Behaviors

The first regression analysis assessed the relationship between community violence exposure through victimization and witnessing, ethnic identity, and
internalizing symptoms. Community violence exposure through victimization and witnessing and ethnic identity served as the predictor variables, and internalizing behaviors served as the outcome variable. The results showed significance for community violence exposure through victimization predicting internalizing symptoms $F(1, 99) = 12.914, p < 0.05$ (Table 2). The results failed to show any significance for community violence exposure through witnessing and ethnic identity on aggression.

**Table 2. Regression analysis for variables predicting internalizing behaviors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Witness to Violence</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of Violence</td>
<td>.184</td>
<td>.344**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>-.065</td>
<td>-.154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $R^2 = .15$ ($N = 100$, $p < .05$); *$p < .05$; **Significant level with $p = .003$

**Regression Analysis for External Behaviors**

The second regression analysis assessed the relationship between community violence exposure through victimization and witnessing, ethnic identity, and aggression. Community violence exposure through victimization and witnessing, and ethnic identity served as the predictor variables, and aggression served as the outcome variable. The results showed significance with community violence exposure through victimization and ethnic identity on aggression, $F(1, 99) = 12.278, p < 0.01$ (Table 3). Specifically, as community violence exposure through victimization increased, there was an increase in aggression; as ethnic identity increased, there was a decrease in aggression. Community violence exposure through witnessing did not predict aggression.

**Table 3. Regression analysis for variables predicting externalizing behaviors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Witness to Violence</td>
<td>.175</td>
<td>.204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimization to Violence</td>
<td>.463</td>
<td>.367**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>-.198</td>
<td>-.200**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $R^2 = .305$ ($N = 100$, $p < .01$); *$p < .05$; **Significant level with $p = .001$

**Regression Analysis for School Misconduct**

The third regression analysis assessed the relationship between community violence exposure through victimization and witnessing, ethnic identity, and
school misconduct. Community violence exposure through victimization and witnessing, along with ethnic identity served as the predictor variables, and school misconduct served as the outcome variable. The results showed that community violence exposure through witnessing, along with ethnic identity significantly predicted school misconduct, $F(1, 99) = 13.069, p < 0.01$ (Table 4). As community violence exposure through witnessing increased, there was an increase in school misconduct. As ethnic identity increased, there was a decrease in school misconduct. Community violence exposure through victimization did not predict school misconduct.

**Table 4.** Regression analysis for variables predicting school misconduct behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Witness to Violence</td>
<td>.540</td>
<td>.189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of Violence</td>
<td>.290</td>
<td>.276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>-.567</td>
<td>.147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $R^2 = .31$ ($N = 100, p < .01$); *$p < .05$; **Significant level with $p = .001$

**DISCUSSION**

This study investigated violence exposure and at-risk and violent behaviors in Hmong young adults. These results are partially congruent with the first hypothesis that community violence exposure to violence would predict at-risk and violent behaviors. The results also partially supported the second hypothesis that ethnic identity would serve as a protective factor for at-risk and violent behaviors. In particular, the study found that Hmong young adults reporting higher exposure of community violence through victimization reported higher internalizing symptoms, but failed to find a relationship between community violence exposure through witnessing on internalizing symptoms and externalizing behaviors. The study also found that Hmong young adults reporting higher exposure of community violence through victimization were found to report higher symptoms of aggression. These findings are consistent with past research that found that exposure to community violence affects behavioral problems (Farver et al. 2005). An alternative explanation for the current finding is that violent behavior may be normalized to the participants and become familiarized with specific reactions to situations (Wilkinson and Carr 2008).

This study also examined the relationship between the impact of community violence exposure (victimization and witnessing) on school misconduct. The results indicated that community violence exposure through witnessing significantly predicted school misconduct; Hmong young adults reporting higher levels of witnessing community violence were found to report...
more school misconduct. This finding is consistent with other research, which found that exposure to community violence increases poor school functioning (Farver et al. 2005) and poor educational outcomes (Voisin 2007).

For the protective factor of ethnic identity, the results indicated no significant relationship between ethnic identity as a protective or risk factor for internalizing symptoms and externalizing behaviors. However, the results showed that ethnic identity significantly predicted school misconduct. Hmong young adults reporting higher ethnic identity were found to report lower school misconduct. This finding is consistent with the study by Phinney et al. (2001), which found that immigrant adolescent who have higher positive cultural identities have higher levels of school adjustment. An alternative explanation for this finding could be that Hmong parents place a strong value on education, and understand that an individual who has an education in the U.S. is mostly likely to survive and succeed. When achievement is an aspect of ethnic identity, school performance increases (Phinney et al. 2001). With this strong value for education, Hmong young adults may have a better understanding of their own ethnic group and strongly identify with it.

LIMITATIONS
There were several limitations to the current study. One limitation was that self-reporting was used to collect data from participants; given that this study focused on at-risk behaviors, participants may have been reluctant to reveal this type of behavior to the researcher, even though they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Another limitation is that the findings in this research do not concretely identify causal factors of violence. The findings only suggest that there is a relationship between the main study variables. This study’s focus on a specific Asian American population, which limits comparisons to other Asian population and to other ethnic groups also may be a limitation. Another limitation in this study may be the sample population from which a majority reported their level of education as including some college, which created a sample with little educational and social class variation. These participants may have developed healthy coping strategies to get to a college-level education. Participants from a broader background, including social class and other demographic variables, could have been recruited to better represent Hmong young adults in the greater Northern California area.

FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research studies can examine other protective or contributing factors of the effects of community violence exposure. One factor involves coping
strategies people may use in the face of challenges. An investigation of coping strategies can give researchers insight into the ways individuals may process and manage stress, and can help further explain the internalizing and externalizing symptoms associated with community violence exposure.

For future research studies, longitudinal studies may be used to evaluate violence exposure to indicate a more direct causality with community violence exposure and the impact on internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

**CONCLUSION**

The current study found a relationship between community violence exposure through victimization and internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Furthermore, the current study found a relationship between community violence exposure through witnessing and school misconduct. Research on these dimensions can help us to better understand how community violence exposure may impact how Hmong Americans adapt to the culture of the United States. This study also found that ethnic identity serves as a protective factor for externalizing symptoms and school misconduct. An individual’s knowledge of, sense of belonging to, and attachment to his or her own ethnic group plays an important role and can help buffer negative factors (Phinney et al. 2001). This research can help us to better understand the Hmong population as they continue to adapt and form new identities in the United States, and to identify preventative strategies and methods to reduce the impact of community violence on this population.
REFERENCES


